



Sustainability's application in real-world public policy bears a closer look.

Envisioning Sustainable Communities

by Jonathan Harrington

For decades, the term “sustainability” has occupied a prominent place in the lexicon of public servants, scientists, and the public. However, there is still much confusion about the meaning of this heavily used concept and how it should be applied in the rough-and-tumble world of public policy.

Intellectual Origins

The intellectual origins of sustainability can be traced to the developing fields of ecology and environmental economics in the 1960s. The main focus of these thinkers is ecological sustainability, which emphasizes the importance of preserving natural capital, such as minimizing human-induced environmental and ecological harms through strict management of natural resources and ecosystems.

In *Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth*, author Lester Brown explains that achieving ecological sustainability requires two things. First, a resource that is being used (resource stock) should not be depleted. Second, the ecological service provided by the resource (resource flow) should not diminish over time.

A real-world example of an ecologically managed resource is Western Washington's Cedar River Watershed. Over many decades, the City of Seattle has developed a comprehensive resource management system that, according to most experts, maintains the health and viability of local ecosystems while also supplying a steady supply of quality fresh water to more than 1.4 million residents.

Since the 1970s, perceptions of sustainability have broadened to encompass social and economic imperatives. This transformation is most succinctly

articulated by the UN-sponsored 1987 Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future*. Brundtland highlights the importance of balancing social, economic, and environmental needs over time.

Sustainability links economy, environment, and social imperatives into one comprehensive decision-making process. It emphasizes long-term change and its impact on intergenerational equality. It also recognizes natural resource scarcity and the limited carrying capacities of ecosystems.

But how do you balance seemingly divergent social, economic, and environmental imperatives? This is where confusion sets in. Varying

Initiatives (ICLEI) have made much progress in standardizing policy rubrics and defining and measuring sustainability at the local level.

These associations foster collaboration, resource sharing, and communication among jurisdictions. They also provide valuable technical expertise to community leaders who are interested in promoting sustainability but don't know where to start.

One strategy leading the way in advancing local sustainable development is ICLEI's Star Community Index program. The index, which delineates 10 guiding sustainability principles along with 81 policy goals, is the culmination of more than 20 years

from cross-jurisdictional partnerships and organizational linkages with ICLEI is King County, Washington. King County has more than 1.8 million residents spread across 39 cities and towns, including the City of Seattle. The citizens of King County have a long-standing interest in environmental issues.

This orientation is reflected in the successful political career of Ron Sims—the administrator who is most responsible for steering county operations toward a more sustainable path. Sims was first elected to the King County Council in 1985 and served in that position until he became King County Executive in 1997. He served as chief executive from 1996 to 2009, when he was appointed deputy secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

Sims' official interest in sustainability began early in his public career, when he and another fellow Council member proposed establishing a King County office of global warming. In 1992, Council member Sims along with other county officials engaged in negotiations with Washington to develop a 20-year strategy aimed at fostering balanced growth.

According to the report "Seeking Sustainable and Inclusive Communities" in *What Works Collaborative: Building Knowledge and Sharing Solutions for Housing and Urban Policy*, the ensuing planning process, which has been repeatedly updated and "greened" over the years, touches almost every aspect of County operations.

In partnership with ICLEI, King County carried out a comprehensive greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory of its operations in 2002 and promulgated a wide-ranging climate action plan in 2007. In 2006, it became the first county in the United States to join the

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community circumstances, competing political and economic interests, changing scientific and technological capabilities, and vacillating public concerns inevitably skew the understanding of how to prioritize disparate goals. Unfortunately, confusion often results in either piecemeal effort or complete inaction.

Professional Organizations Promote Sustainability

Fortunately, numerous initiatives are already underway around the United States that promote the development of resilient, livable, economically viable, and environmentally responsible communities. Professional organizations such as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the International Council of Local and Environmental

of work to develop technical tools and standardized sustainability measures.

This comprehensive planning and evaluation rubric was collaboratively designed by ICLEI and its 600 member governments across the United States. The Star Community Index helps communities

- create or revise a sustainability plan
- conduct a sustainability assessment
- establish local sustainability priorities
- focus ongoing sustainability initiatives.

Case Study: King County, Washington

One pioneering government that has both contributed to and benefitted

Ron Sims' tenure as King County Executive highlights the value of perseverance. Sustainable communities cannot be built overnight.

Chicago Climate Exchange. In 2010, the County became one of nine pilot community participants in ICLEI's Star Community Index Program.

Lessons Learned

What can we learn from King County's sustainability initiatives? The first important ingredient to building a healthier, more resilient community is vision.

Ron Sims demonstrated a clear commitment to sustainability early in his career and hired competent administrators that shared his values. He understood that uncontrolled growth not only damages the environment, but also diminishes overall quality of life.

Sims also embraced a comprehensive long-term planning approach. One example of this is King County's HealthScape program. Established in 2001, HealthScape includes baseline measures for transportation investment, travel options, and land use, and it focuses on how these factors affect air quality, health, and climate change. Sims required every department to develop annual plans to reduce inequality among different jurisdictions and population groups.

Another critical element is fostering interagency and intergovernmental partnerships. Sims stressed the importance of cross-agency work teams to encourage communication among disparate bureaucratic entities. His administration was instrumental in assisting many of its 39 local jurisdictions to develop their

own growth management plans and obtain state and federal funding for innovative projects.

Finally, Sims' tenure as King County Executive highlights the value of perseverance. Sustainable communities cannot be built overnight. Sims was fortunate to serve in his position for more than 12 years. By the time he moved on, his vision and planning philosophy permeated every corner of county government. This enabled his successor to pick up where he left off—without missing a beat.

Not There Yet

It is important to remember that while communities such as King County, Washington, have made significant strides in developing policies and processes that promote sustainability, it has a long way to go before it achieves true sustainable development. King County still struggles with traffic congestion, dependency on non-renewable fossil fuels, suburban sprawl, and high per capita GHG emissions relative to other developed countries.

In fact, relatively few U.S. cities and towns have even begun the long journey toward sustainability. ICMA's annual Local Government Sustainability Policies and Programs survey reported that in 2010 only 28 percent of participating jurisdictions had adopted formal sustainability resolutions or action plans.

A mere 11 percent of governments had established GHG reduction targets for local government operations, and 13 percent had

established fuel-efficiency targets for government vehicle fleets. Only 7 percent of governments offered incentives for local government employees to take public transportation to and from work.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of real-world examples or clearly articulated measures and strategies that local governments can draw on to build stronger, more resilient communities. The ideas and know-how are out there. What is lacking is the political will to translate good wishes into concrete action.

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RESOURCES

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